

INTRODUCTION

Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

WE ARE IN A MOMENT of collective suffering. As the accelerating climate emergency devastates homes, crops, and lives, primarily in the Global South, it is contributing to despair and anxiety everywhere. In the United States, deaths of despair are increasing. Suicide rates rose 30 percent between 2000 and 2020.^{1,2} Opioids kill more Americans than car crashes.³ One in six Americans takes psychiatric medication, primarily for depression and anxiety.⁴ Virtually all of us resort to numbing or distraction: We watch 33 hours of TV a week, scroll endlessly on social media, play video games, and watch pornography.⁵ We drink too much, eat too much, work too much, compete too much, and buy too much. Simply put, Americans—and people all over the world—are in pain.

There is, of course, an enormous self-help industry dedicated to helping us feel better. Books, podcasts, and seminars say we're unhappy because we are disconnected from other people and over-connected to technology; they say that we are harshly self-critical and care too much about what other people think; that we live in a suspended adolescence; that we don't manage our money properly; don't take enough emotional risks, aren't living our best lives, and don't practice enough self-care. Others rightfully point to the glaring realities of inequality, poverty, and precarity as the cause of our pain. These narratives are each important and valid to some degree, and they may offer some help.

But there's something else going on; something is eating at us. We are in pain because our world is dying, and through our passivity, we are responsible for killing it.

Inside all of us, a battle rages. It's the battle between knowing and not knowing, between fully facing the truth—emotionally and intellectually—and shrinking from it. We sense we're in a climate emergency and mass extinction event, but we have a deep-seated psychological instinct to defend against that knowledge. The pain is shouting at us: "Everything is dying!" Part of us knows that humanity and the natural world are in peril. Indeed, we feel the horrors of civilizational collapse and the sixth mass extinction of species in our bodies. But another part attempts to shield us from this pain—we avoid and deny, distract and numb ourselves from what we know. These defenses work, but only temporarily: When we fail to process our emotions and mourn our losses, the pain takes on tremendous power. It follows us around like a shadow, and we become increasingly desperate to avoid the by now obvious truth.

This pain has several dimensions. It is the fear we feel for ourselves, our loved ones, and for all humanity; it is the empathy and grief we feel for the people and species already immiserated or killed; it is the crushing guilt we feel for continuing to let this happen. Our pain is the consequence of our participation in a destructive system. We have allowed ourselves to become killers—a plague on the rest of life. We share, to varying degrees, guilt and responsibility.^{6,7}

Our pain may feel terrible, but it is rational, appropriate, and deserved. It is an internal reflection of external reality: The biosphere—all life—is suffering or threatened. *Of course* we feel sad and anxious. We are caught in an economic and political system that fosters our collective participation in our planet's daily degradation. Why would we expect to feel good, or good about ourselves while we participate in killing all life on Earth, including ourselves and everyone we love?

On the one hand, we are victims. No one asked to be born into this broken system that treats all life as disposable and allows for unprecedented levels of inequality. We have been failed by the people and institutions tasked with protecting us—first and foremost, our governments and elected representatives. This governmental failure could not be more complete. The total abdication of duty to protect humanity and all life has made the social contract between government and citizens a sick joke.

But the government is not alone: Media outlets, universities, churches, museums, labor unions, environmental organizations, professional associations, and countless others have also failed to acknowledge and protect us from the climate emergency.

And, of course, corporations, such as fossil fuel companies like ExxonMobil, bear the lion's share of responsibility for the global cataclysm that is well underway. For decades, the fossil fuel industry has run a multibillion-dollar campaign of lies and climate denial. It has successfully sowed doubt in our society and blocked anything approaching an appropriate response from our elected leaders. The level of cravenness required to lie to the public about catastrophic warming to continue our addiction to fossil fuels is appalling.

Many other corporations are implicated. Monsanto and other agricultural corporations, big banks, airlines, carmakers, and others have pursued a similarly environmentally devastating business model—killing and endangering life in exchange for short-term profits.

On the other hand, we—you and me—are not merely victims. Through our passive participation in this system, we are also perpetrators. We have failed ourselves and each other. We've allowed our home to be robbed, and now we are watching it burn. Although humanity has become almost godlike in our power to create and destroy, we have remained childlike in our use of that power. It's time to find our maturity and our heroism.

In 1956, psychoanalyst and activist Erich Fromm wrote *The Art of Loving*, which examined the psychological impacts of a

consumer-capitalist society on individuals. Fromm argued that people are alienated from their work, from themselves, and from each other. He noted that people had been sold the view that life was one big competition or marketplace and that people were commodities who should try to maximize not just their money but also their popularity and attractiveness. He observed that people in these societies treat themselves like commodities in a competitive market, adopting false selves to fit in and be liked while abandoning their authenticity and sense of true purpose.

This ideology still prevails today and fosters the following beliefs:

- You are an isolated individual, defined by what you achieve, how much you earn, and what you buy.
- You should focus on competition with others and personal indulgence.
- The only way to receive love and acceptance is to own more things.
- There is no community, and there is no web of life.
- Other people are threatening, especially people who are a different race or culture.
- You have no moral responsibilities. You are a deprived victim who deserves much more than you get.
- You are living at the pinnacle of human achievement, defined by constant economic growth, and it's naïve to think there could be anything different.
- You may feel unpleasant feelings, but they will disappear if you buy something.

In his essay “Love of Death and Love of Life,” Fromm postulated that the only reason people would not rise against the possibility of worldwide nuclear destruction was if they were already anticipating that destruction: On some level, he reasoned, the destruction must have felt appropriate and even appealing—better, at least,

than this bullshit, dead-end, alienated, and humiliating life. Otherwise, why did our society allow the risk of mass nuclear obliteration to threaten us for decades? Fromm believed if people inherently felt their lives were precious and worth living, if they felt engaged in life and saw that engagement reflected in others, if people were not housing a deadness within, they would demand an end to the creation of weapons of mass destruction. They would refuse to accept the possibility of the end of all life.⁸

When it comes to the climate crisis, we must ask ourselves the same question: When faced with our current ecological disaster and the worst that is still to come, why are we passively accepting mass suicide and mass murder? Have we given in to death's pull?

When we see the media address dire scientific reports in a few stern sentences before cutting away to celebrity gossip, when we see passivity and resignation to our fate from friends and community members, when we hear the refrain of “we’re fucked,” we have to conclude that the coming ecological crisis must feel like an expected and maybe even a fitting end to our degraded society. How can we otherwise make sense of the fact that more people aren’t rioting in the streets at the imminent destruction of their lives, their children’s lives, and the entire web of life?

Our society treats life—human, plant, and animal life—as if it were a cheap commodity rather than the most precious, sacred thing there is. By doing so, we’ve not only created the ecological crisis, we’ve desensitized ourselves to it. Maybe this is why worldwide annihilation seems to be an appropriate end: It reflects the emotional and spiritual destruction we’ve internalized.

Do we want to live? If we do, we need to wake up and grow up—right now. We may be about to lose everything, but we aren’t dead yet. It doesn’t have to be this way. We can face climate truth and choose not to commit passive suicide.

Indeed, we are in a new age of heroes. More and more people are going all-in for all life, and they are doing extraordinary things. You will hear from several of these activists below. They are smart,

strategic, brave, and desperate. They are channeling their feelings into a powerful movement that disrupts normalcy and demands rapid global transformation of our energy, agricultural, economic, and social systems. These activists can spark the collective awakening we need. They are our best hope. My goal in this book is to inspire you to take your rightful place beside them.

We can choose to turn away from illusion and distraction. We can each decide to face climate truth and decide that now is the time to do everything in our power to wrest life back from the jaws of extinction. We can each help to initiate a collective awakening to the climate emergency and a World War II-scale response that protects humanity and the natural world and builds a beloved community.

One of my deepest beliefs is in the immensity of human potential. As a therapist, I have seen people overcome trauma, addiction, and personality issues—and thrive. Looking at the history of social movements, I see how society evolves by leaps and bounds. I see how, during all-hands-on-deck emergency mobilizations, the impossible becomes possible. During WWII, the first computer came into regular use, RADAR and blood transfusions were innovated, as well as breakthroughs in manufacturing, class, race, and gender equality. For a few years, taxes on the highest earners were over 90 percent, and factories had daycares and take-away meals for women who joined the workforce in droves.⁹

Today we need a national emergency mission of a comparable scale to restore our climate and natural world. But we can do it! In this, my beliefs align with Oscar Wilde: “The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes.”¹⁰

Most people approach climate in terms of limiting damage, but we can aim higher than that. We can set the goal of restoring biodiversity and the preindustrial climate.¹¹ I refuse to give up on a vision of an Earth teeming with life. Some will say it’s impossible, that too much damage is already done. But we have barely scratched the surface of human potential. We don’t know what

our limits are in protecting our climate because we have never tried. Once we actually get started, with all hands on deck, directing our collective brilliance toward responding to this emergency, we will do amazing things. Humans will finally act as responsible stewards of nature, and of each other.

To do so, we must shake off our resignation and our selfish consumerist programming and denounce the lies that aid and abet denial. Each of us must do our part to reestablish our connection to humanity and all life, and to recognize our bottomless responsibility to protect it. We must acknowledge that responsibility, and use our talents, energy, privileges, and resources in the struggle. We must join with each other. We must allow ourselves to face the truth and to accept the reality that we must transform—now—individually and together, to respond effectively to the climate crisis.

Socialism has experienced a resurgence in recent years—partly because many people see capitalism as responsible for the climate emergency. It's true: Capitalism, with its dependence on endless growth, its tendency to concentrate wealth and increase inequality when unchecked, its treatment of workers as disposable and the living world as expendable, and its relentless use of advertising to make good citizens synonymous with good consumers, is fundamental to the problem.¹²

However, we can't blame capitalism alone. Our industrial and extractive approach to meeting human needs is bigger than capitalism, which is simply the main scheme by which these destructive activities are coordinated and their ill-gotten gains hoarded. The communist totalitarian Soviet Union was easily as damaging to ecosystems as the market-based United States¹³ and was the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gasses during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.¹⁴ China, with its primarily state-driven economy, has now become the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gasses. The social democratic state of Norway owns 67 percent of Equinor, formerly Statoil—an oil and energy company.¹⁵

To have any hope of surviving the climate and ecological catastrophe, we must transform our destructive economy into a regenerative one, and do it at emergency speed. We don't just need zero emissions in every sector; we need massive carbon drawdown projects that restore ecosystems and the soil. We need permaculture and food localization; we need an end to mass consumerism and endless growth; we need to give back half the Earth to nature to restore biodiversity,¹⁶ and we need to create a society based on protecting and healing humanity and the natural world. This means transforming not only our energy, agricultural, transportation, and industrial systems but also transforming ourselves and how we relate to each other. We need to rethink our basic concept of who we are and what matters.

And we need to do it all right now.



This is a self-help book, but its goal is not to make you feel less pain. Its purpose is to make you feel your pain more directly and constructively, to turn it into action that protects humanity and all life. I argue that your pain is a signal—it's telling you something critically important. The pain is demanding to be acknowledged, and I want to show you how to listen and learn how to attend to it. I want you to face the pain of the climate and ecological emergency and to feel it in a focused, conscious way so that the pain launches you into a process of transformation—first in yourself and then in society as a whole. This large-scale change must be our goal, as Pope Francis wrote in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*. To stop the climate emergency, he says, we must “become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”¹⁷

I've been through this process myself: I've felt the pain, faced it, and I have been transformed by it. Ten years ago, in 2012, I was a young professional in New York City—a clinical psychologist

working on a doctoral degree, preparing to enter private practice and start paying off my six-figure student debt. I avoided thinking or reading about the climate because it made me feel terrified and helpless. I would read the first sentences of articles about global warming, say to myself, *Nope! I can't handle it; it's too scary*. Then I'd close the article and distract myself with something else.

Then Hurricane Sandy hit New York City, and everything came to a standstill. Destruction was everywhere. I vividly remember seeing a car smashed by a huge branch. On the shattered windshield, a cardboard sign read, *Is global warming the culprit?* Seeing the message caused something in me to shift. I knew the answer to that question, though my knowledge was diffuse. That sign helped me focus: If global warming had smashed that car and the whole city, what else could it do? How bad was this situation, and what did our collective future hold? With these questions in mind, I started to educate myself. This was the beginning of my waking up. I began to finish the articles that had previously overwhelmed me. I started to seek out books on the climate and ecological emergencies.

What I learned shook me to my core—and caused me to reassess my life. I realized that it was my responsibility to do everything I could to halt and reverse the coming catastrophe.

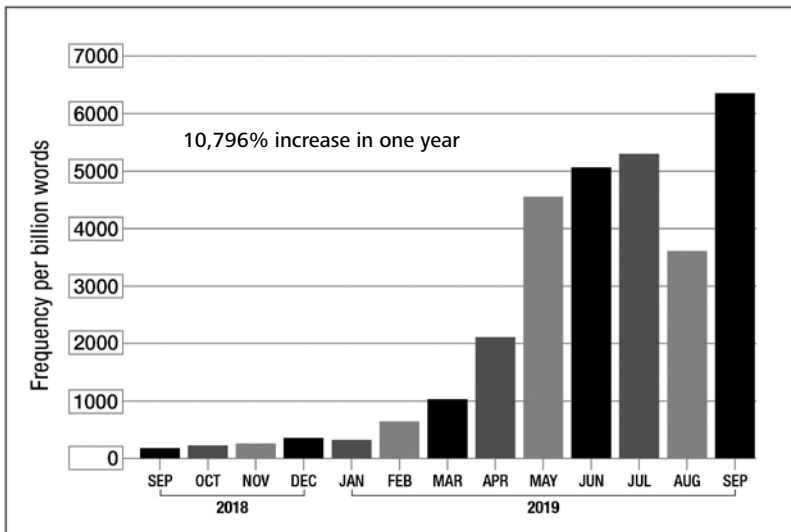
So I left the field of clinical psychology—which I love—and dove headfirst into activism. My husband and I focused on necessities, moving into a small apartment and making the minimum student loan payments, so that I could build an organization as a volunteer. He supported us, and my parents helped out as well, privileges relatively few have.

First, I published a blog—*The Climate Psychologist*—which was oriented toward recruiting like-minded people to build a social movement. I met Ezra Silk through that blog, and we founded and built an organization called The Climate Mobilization, or TCM. The Climate Mobilization was a combination of a think tank and an advocacy organization. We published cutting-edge thought leadership advocating for WWII-scale climate mobilization.

With the help of an amazing team of volunteer organizers, we mainstreamed the “Climate Emergency” frame by initiating a city-based Climate Emergency declaration. This strategy was operationalized on a city-by-city basis: Hoboken, New Jersey, Montgomery County, Maryland, and Berkeley, California were among the first cities to declare a Climate Emergency after vigorous local organizing campaigns. We expanded its reach by sharing the campaign with Extinction Rebellion and watched as it went viral. In 2019, use of the term “Climate Emergency” went up 10,000 percent and *Oxford* declared it Word of the Year.¹⁸

As the broader movement took up the ideas of Climate Emergency and WWII-scale Climate Mobilization, I began to focus on two areas: the emotional aspects of the climate emergency and strategic philanthropy. I published the book’s first edition in 2020 and then launched Climate Emotions Conversations, an online platform through which hundreds of people from all over the world have shared their climate feelings in small-group guided conversations.¹⁹

Usage of “Climate Emergency”



Through this, and my other work in the movement, I've had countless conversations with people—from elected leaders to climate scientists to stay-at-home moms to hedge fund managers to janitors—about how to process fear and respond to climate truth.

I was an advisor to Aileen Getty, Rory Kennedy, and Trevor Neilson as they set up the Climate Emergency Fund in 2019, and in 2021, I joined as Executive Director. It is an honor to fundraise and make grants to the climate emergency movement.

My climate mission is a light inside me, it's my animating force. I want that feeling for you, too. As Albert Camus put it, "In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer."²⁰ The winter of climate catastrophe is everywhere, and yet through living in climate truth and dedicating yourself to protecting humanity and the living world, you will stay warm and well.

Since I faced up to the truth and started to change my life and support the movement, my life has improved in countless ways. I used to be harshly self-critical. But knowing that I am doing everything I can for the mission has helped me find a sense of inner peace. I am obsessed with it. It is such a relief to care about something more than myself.

This may sound like an outlandish mentality and lifestyle, but I see people undergo this transformation all the time. It's what I call "the movement mentality." All over the world, ordinary people are performing extraordinary feats of service—rearranging their lives, leaving their jobs, donating until it hurts, and risking arrest, to go all-in for this mission. When asked about their motivations, activists frequently say something along the lines of, "this is all that matters," or "I don't want to be doing this, I have to."

It's not easy, and I'm not perfect. I'm always busy, frequently stressed, sometimes grumpy, and occasionally mean. I have more student debt than when I earned my doctorate. I sometimes neglect my health. But I wouldn't want to live any other way. I would never, ever go back to my state of passive ignorance.

As the number of people operating with the movement mentality increases, so will the success and urgency of the movement. We are seeing the rise of a new, uniquely powerful, focused, and determined, disruptive global activist movement.

At Climate Emergency Fund, I have had the honor of supporting some of the leading disruptive climate activism in the world: Climate scientists chained themselves to the White House and the doors of banks in order to communicate the urgency and wake up the public, Just Stop Oil blocked eleven fossil fuel infrastructure sites at a time, impacting the oil supply to whole regions of the UK²¹ and famously threw soup onto paintings.²² Meanwhile their sister organization, Dernière Renovation, disrupted the Tour de France.²³ These are all spectacular nonviolent, disruptive actions calculated to wake up the public.

It's working. This is what the beginning of a collective awakening looks like—more and more people deciding that they will not sit quietly while the world around us dies. The awakened must also make it our job to wake up the rest. The members of this movement are not content to numb our sadness with money and things. We're not willing to ignore the Earth as it burns. We're going to fight like hell for everything we love.

This book will show you how to join our ranks as members of the climate emergency movement. In it, I will ask you to tap into your fear about our current climate crisis and the future we are careening toward. I will help you mourn what has already been lost and what we continue to lose every day. I will help you transform your despair into a collective effort to build power for the movement.

It's not going to be easy. It's going to be the opposite of easy. But acknowledging the truth of our climate and ecological emergency, grieving our lost futures, and taking the heroic path will make you confident and strong. It will give you a mission and purpose beyond anything you have experienced. It will allow you, at long last, to heal your pain and feel genuinely good about yourself.

It will connect you to your fellow humans, and it will connect you to all life. It will give you real hope, based on your real potential to affect real change.

But most importantly, it will help give humanity a better chance of canceling the apocalypse and protecting itself and the living world.

It will be a difficult journey, but I can promise you that something extraordinary will happen when you commit to it. You will feel hope; you will know that you are part of the solution; you will see that you are doing your part to save the world. In other words—it feels fantastic to contribute to the movement!

When you face climate truth and let it transform you, you will become heroic, leveraging your talents, energy, and resources in service of protecting humanity and all life. No one is coming to save us, but together, we might be able to save ourselves.



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How do you feel about the climate emergency?
- Do you feel anxiety, depression, or have other painful psychological experiences that you struggle to define?
- How might the climate crisis and species extinction drive some of those feelings?
- Have you experienced any sense of the inner deadness that Fromm describes?
- How and to what extent have you replaced your love of life with a love of objects?
- Can you imagine yourself as a hero? As a protector?